

Mr. Hessel, reel one-- please tell me about your family background.

My family comes from Germany. I was actually born in Berlin, and the family settled into France in 1924, when I was six years old. Went to school in France.

My father is-- was a writer. He died in 1941. My mother was a journalist. They both were very keen on Franco-German relations. And my father was the translator of some of the French literature. He translated Marcel Proust together with Walter Benjamin. He translated some of the Balzac books. He translated Jules Romains, Albert Cohen and so on.

So he was very keen on Paris. He lived there. He married there. And we all came to France in 1924. I went to school in France, and I graduated through the École normale supérieure, which as you know perhaps, is the school where one gets into literary or teaching professions. And this happened when the war broke out in 1939.

I was there for-- on the path of becoming a professor of philosophy because I tried to study philosophy at the École normale supérieure. This I gave up after the war to turn into diplomacy.

My first contact with England was early in 1933, when my mother sent me over here to live with a cousin of ours whose house was in West Wickham, Kent. And I spent one year studying at the London School of Economics and came back to France then to prepare for the École normale supérieure.

What was your attitude towards the regime which appeared in Germany in 1933?

Obviously, my parents-- my father was from a Jewish family. My mother has always been turned to-- very much to democracy and the left. Therefore we were very, very much against anything that happened in Germany then. And we considered Hitler to be one of the most awful things that could happen to this country of ours which, after all, was still our country.

And we felt much closer, of course, to those who tried to fight it. We had many German friends who had tried to fight it. [? Some ?] had ended up in concentration camps even before the war. So there was no doubt in our feeling about fascism and anti-fascism.

In fact, I had a lot of contact in Paris in the years 1935, '36, during the Front populaire with international anti-fascism. Aldous Huxley was a friend of my family. People like André Breton and others who started the literary anti-fascist movement in Paris were friends of ours-- which shows you that there was no doubt in my mind as to what might happen if ever Hitler did win out.

What were you doing at the time of the Munich crisis?

I was in Paris. I was working to enter the École normale. This was my last year before the concours which brought me into the École normale. And obviously I was among those who felt somewhat relieved, because we had the feeling that Hitler could be brought down without a war.

And we were very much against war as such. We felt that war had been something awful in the 1914-18 World War, and that another war would not solve any problem, that the way to bring Hitler down was economy, was to have the real good Germans rise up against him.

This was, of course, our illusion, and we therefore did not react-- personally at least, I did not react like other friends of mine who felt that Munich was a very bad deal. I didn't know enough about the intricacies of diplomacy at that time, and I believed more or less the official version, that this was only going to be a momentary relief for the Allied countries to better prepare and then to be able to out-do the Germans.

And when the war broke out?

Well, when the war broke out, of course, there was no more anything to think about except to try to fight

and do whatever our duty was. I was then traveling with the girl who was to become my wife a few months later in Greece. And we came back from Greece in the summer of 1939. I was then conscripted of course to the school in Saint-Maixent, where army officers, infantry army officers were trained.

And we decided to marry a little bit because it was now time when the war broke out to at least have settled that part of our life. And I was happily married for 45 years after that. I lost my wife three years ago and remarried with the woman you just met.

So in 1939, I was in this Military Academy of Saint-Maixent with a large bunch of other *École normale supérieure* students. They were all trained together to become army officers. This lasted for four months, from September '40-- '39 to January '40. And in January '40, I was sent to another training camp in [PLACE NAME] not far from Angers.

And then two months later, I was sent to the Saar, where I was drafted into as a junior officer into a very special unit which was a cyclist unit. And the captain of that cyclist unit strangely enough was Captain Foucault, who later on became one of the top people in the BCRA. I met him there again he was one of the prominent resistance people, and he is till now doing work on getting the former resistance people to have their rights given to them in Paris.

So Foucault was my first chief in the war. And for a few weeks only we fought at that Saar region until the Germans broke the front completely. We then withdrew by night long marches, very desperate situation. We were all very unhappy about the turn of events which was unforeseen to us. We didn't really believe that the war-- that the Germans would ever break through the Maginot Line as they did.

And finally I was taken by the Germans. I was made prisoner in a little village called Bourbonne-les-Bains, where they put us into an officer's camp.

Can you tell me what your feelings are about morale in the French army in '39, '40? Because we read from the history books that morale in the French army was very poor, and that this was one of the main reasons why the Germans were so successful in their attack in May.

Yes, that is certainly quite true. The morale was-- grew worse by the weeks. I must say, I was privileged because this Captain Foucault unit was a very valiant one, and he was a very real military chief whom we all admired. But that was very much the exception.

Mostly, we had the feeling that this war didn't lead anywhere, that things were moving too slowly, that there-- Norway was not successful, that everywhere there was a lack of real stamina, that what had happened in Poland was just awful. We did not trust the Soviet Union at that time, of course because of the German-Russian pact.

And the morale was bad. And it became worse and worse as we withdrew because we witnessed superior higher officers getting away quickly, leaving their men behind. There was a complete disruption of the fabric of the French army.

Of course, as one single officer, one witnessed only a small part of it. But the general feeling was very, very poor. And there was no sense that orders were coming through to organize a retreat in a proper manner. One retreated as one could. People were lost on the roads.

It was really the surprise effect of the German attack was such that whatever morale could have remained before, it disappeared very quickly. So without being in any way militarily competent-- I have no competence in strategic affairs, but I can say that the general feeling we had was one of great dismay at the lack of discipline, the lack of organization of the French army.

Some people say that the political extremes on the left and the right in France, in the French army even, were for their different reasons trying to undermine morale. Is it true?

It's hard to judge. The general thing that was generally said and thought by people like myself was that

there was in France a minority, not very large but influential, which really was on the side of the Germans, which was what we call the fifth column.

And people who disliked the Republic, who disliked democratic institutions in France, and who did all they could to have France weakened in front of the assault of fascism. After all, fascism is now in complete disrepute everywhere. But at the time, it was not, and many people felt that the way the fascists treated the economy, and the morale, and nationalism, and so on, that was the right thing to do.

And there were quite a number of Frenchmen, particularly in the higher bourgeoisie, who felt that it was better to have a regime like the fascist regime rather than communism or than Front populaire. These people were not in great numbers, but after all they furnished the background of collaboration in later years. So they did exist.

On the extreme left?

The extreme left, no. Well, that is probably a question of where one stands oneself. I was always rather on the moderate left side. I've always been close to the socialists, still am. And for me, the communists were not bitter enemies but rather people who had strayed a little bit too far.

We knew, of course, about the trials in Moscow. We knew about a lot of evil things we're told already about Stalin and the regime there. But the French communists we considered rather as having been betrayed by Stalin in the Soviet-German pact, rather than being on his side, so that we were unhappy about the way the communists had to behave and very relieved when they finally came back into the war effort.

When the British army evacuated at Dunkirk, what was your attitude and that of your comrades towards the British evacuation?

We knew too little about it, really. You see, there was not a lot of communication. We had the feeling that the ones who betrayed the Alliance were the French. We never had the feeling that the British did anything that they shouldn't have done. I know that some people who were in Dunkirk were critical of the way the evacuation was made and there were, of course, in the official French press quite a number of critical attitudes expressed.

But as far as I am concerned and the people with whom I had contact, they felt right from the beginning-- that I mean to say right after June 1940-- that the British were our only hope, and that what they did was the best they could do.

This even applies to Mers-el-Kebir, which was, of course, a point of great difficulty for many Frenchmen who felt that here the British had been very brutal with the French Navy, so there were feelings there. But of course, as far as I'm concerned, having had links with England in my youth and knowing quite a lot about British history, I was very confident, and I never had any feeling of lack of solidarity with Great Britain during this whole period.

Now, coming back to your own personal story, you were in the hands of the Germans and--

Only for a few days. Sorry. I stayed in that officer's camp only three days. Then I escaped. This was my first escape. I became then a professional escapee later on. This was my first escape, and I joined the south of France quite rapidly, where I found my wife in Toulouse. And we decided to try and find a way to join General de Gaulle. This took us about six months from June 1940 until-- even more until February 1941.

Meanwhile, I lost my father, buried him in the south of France, and managed to take a ship to North Africa, go to Casablanca, get a ship there to Lisbon. And I arrived in Bristol by air from Lisbon on March 1941. The first thing that happened to me was that I was taken to London, Victoria Patriotic School.

And there I had a rather amusing story. I had two passports, one in which I was born in Paris and which was a fake passport from that point of view, but which allowed me to cross the Mediterranean and so on. But I had taken with me out of childish unwisdom, my original passport in which I was born in Berlin, as I was-- as

I am.

And of course when the British intelligence found that passport, it made them very suspicious. And they thought, here we at last hold an infiltrated spy. Although of course I'm sure an infiltrated spy would not have taken a passport with him in which he was born in Berlin. But anyhow, this allowed me to stay about one month in the London Victoria Patriotic School, where we were all screened, very nicely treated, and very quickly of course they checked for my cousin here. And they decided that I was all right and let me go.

But during that month, I was able to learn ping-pong with an Estonian sailor whose main story was that New York is the best city in the world because there you can buy a camera at 3 o'clock in the morning. Anyhow, I stayed there one month, and then I was relieved and went to Camberley, joining the free French forces as an infantry officer.

But very quickly, I met with [? Christian ?] Fouchet, who was there then, and whom I had known in Paris, and who told me the best thing to go-- to do is to go into the Air Force. And so I volunteered into the Air Force.

I wanted, of course, like all youngsters, to be a pilot. But I was told that there was no more time to train pilots, and that they took only navigators on training. So I was trained as an air navigator-- air observer it was called at that time-- in the Royal Air Force, in several camps in England.

The first was in Millom, which is up north, then in Milford Haven, I believe, in Wales. And finally, I got my wing, my navigator's wing, on March 1942. But this again was not the last story because at that time, Colonel Passy, who was the chief of the BCRA, asked me to come into the picture in the BCRA, where we had one service for intelligence, one for action, one for political action.

And I was drafted into the service de renseignement, the intelligence unit of the BCRA. And I stayed there from March 19-- or May 1942 until March 1944. This was, of course, an extremely interesting job for a young officer because we had the contacts with the French resistance.

We sent our agents out. We received the whole documentation from France. We gave instructions to the various people in the intelligence networks in France. And it was a extremely interesting time for me to live in London during the war. I frequently recollect the way that England behaved during that period.

I lived in [PLACE NAME] Street and then on Pavilion Road. My wife came over from-- she had gone to America with her parents from Lisbon. When I left for Bristol, she crossed the Atlantic. But she came and joined me bravely because these convoys had many ships sunk by the Germans.

She came over in November of 1942 at the time of the invasion of North Africa. And so we were together in London until March 1944. In March 1944, I finally contrived to be sent to France. We, of course, were all young and willing to do as much as possible. And the idea was not to stay in an office in London but to be active in the resistance.

And therefore I was sent by Lysander to the center of France near Bourges, Saint-Amand-Montrond. And there I took up contact with the various intelligence networks. And my job-- was my assignment was to reorganize the radio network. All the various intelligence groups and resistance groups had radio operators, but they were mostly all located either in Paris or in Lyon.

And foreseeing the invasion, the Liberation Army disembarking, we thought that it would be wiser to have them more widely distributed on the territory so that they could remain in contact with London, even if the country was cut up in parts. This we tried to do and achieved to a certain extent until, unfortunately, on July 10, 1944, one of these radio operators who had been arrested in Lyon gave-- made an appointment with me, and I was taken in by the Gestapo in Paris in July '44.

How had the Gestapo found out?

They had arrested this radio operator, because radio operators were sensitive victims for operations-- loop

operations. He was therefore taken on his job as an operator. He was probably mishandled like we all were, and he agreed in order to save himself to make an appointment with me in Paris and let the Gestapo come to the place where we had our appointment.

Could you paint a picture of the arrival of the Gestapo and what it was like to fall into their hands?

I did. As a matter of fact, I wrote a little article on that in *Les Temps modernes*, you know, Sartre's review, just after the war in 1946. I tried to describe in that article in the best possible way that was available to me the kind of feeling one has when one suddenly becomes not a free man anymore but somebody who is very likely not to survive.

And I call this article *Entre leurs mains*, exactly the words that you used when you said you're now in their hands. I called it *To Be in Their Hands*. And indeed of course, we all knew quite a lot about the Gestapo and how they behave, so it was a very brutal moment.

The worst was that I was not arrested alone, but one of my liaison agents was arrested, too. And another of them was arrested the day after, and he is Jacques [? Brand, ?] who is here with us. He is now the vice president of the [FRENCH] So we were very close at that time and still are.

That was the beginning of my concentration story, which is also a long and tedious story, but I'm at your disposal to tell you about it.

What-- what did the Gestapo first say to you?

Well, they first wanted to be sure that I was the one they were looking for. They knew my name through this radio operator. They knew my-- knew my real name. They also knew through him that I had come from London.

Therefore my first attempt was to tell them that they were completely mistaken, that I was not that person, that that person was a much older man who was in a prominent position, and that I was only a minor agent. And I was only doing my duty as a patriot, et cetera, the kind of thing, the kind of stories one tells.

And they were pretty sure that I was lying. And they insisted. And I had the bath operation, and the electricity operation, all that frame-up. That was more an attempt really to bluff than it was an attempt to hurt. They didn't really hurt very much, but they bluffed one into saying as much as possible that they wanted.

Finally, my great luck was that July and August were, of course, the last moments of Germany in France. And on top of it, it was the time of the plot against Hitler, the 20th of July. And therefore I have the feeling that their interrogation moved much more slowly and perhaps somewhat less brutally than it would have on other occasions.

I was confronted with people, which is always unpleasant. I was beaten up quite a lot, but it was not a thing that one couldn't survive, except that I was, of course, convinced that I would not be released. Because when they finally checked and found out that I must be the Greco they were looking for, which was my code name, and that I was Stephane Hessel "Greco" coming from London et cetera, the only thing they never knew, of course, was that I was born German. This would have been terrible.

I think then they wouldn't have-- and fortunately for me, my father's work was pretty much unknown at the time. If not, they might have thought that I was the son of a prominent German writer.

Anyhow, all this went on as happily as possible for me. I was not mauled, really, in any way. I managed to keep relatively healthy during those three weeks or four weeks until August the 8th when I was put on a train together with Forest Yeo-Thomas and with a group of 37 agents who had all been arrested and who were all sentenced to death.

We didn't know about that, of course. But we found out later that this was a special bunch of 37 whose trial

from Berlin or the orders from Berlin to execute them had not arrived in time. We had to be moved out of Paris because the Allies were approaching.

We were put on a train over Chalons-sur-Marne, Verdun, Sarrebruck, and then Weimar, and all that pretty much in a hurry. And in Weimar, we were in Buchenwald. They were expecting the orders to come from Berlin to execute us. These orders arrived a few days after our reaching Buchenwald.

We reached Buchenwald on August 15. And few days later, I think 21 or 22 of August, 16 of our group were called to the tower and did not return. And we were anxious, of course. And a few days later, we were told by comrades from the organization, the Haftling organization in Buchenwald, that our 16 colleagues had been hanged.

At that time, we tried to find ways to save ourselves. And I owe my life to a very complex combination where-- which is described in great detail in The White Rabbit book which you have probably read or you have it.

So I was one of the three-- Harry Poole, Yeo-Thomas, and myself. We were given the identity of French typhus fever people who had died of typhus fever. And their bodies were sent to the crematorium under our identity, and we took over the identity of these people-- a very complex combination where one of the SS doctors was put into the plot, where Eugen Kogon played an important part, and Balachowsky, another French doctor, also was helpful in all this.

Anyhow, this is how we were saved. And I should have then normally stayed in a small commando in [PLACE NAME]